

CIVIL WAR CASE STUDY 2: THE CHINESE CIVIL WAR (1927–37 AND 1946–49)



Mao Zedong, the communist victor of the Chinese Civil War.

As you read this chapter you need to focus on the following essay questions:

- Analyze the causes of the Chinese Civil War.
- To what extent was the communist victory in China due to the use of guerrilla warfare?
- In what ways was the Chinese Civil War a revolutionary war?

For the first half of the 20th century, China faced political chaos. Following a revolution in 1911, which overthrew the Manchu dynasty, the new Republic failed to take hold and China continued to be exploited by foreign powers, lacking any strong central government. The Chinese Civil War was an attempt by two ideologically opposed forces – the nationalists and the communists – to see who would ultimately be able to restore order and regain central control over China. The struggle between these two forces, which officially started in 1927, was interrupted by the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, but started again in 1946 once the war with Japan was over. The results of this war were to have a major effect not just on China itself, but also on the international stage.

Timeline of events – 1911–27

- 1911** Double Tenth Revolution and establishment of the Chinese Republic
- 1912** Dr Sun Yixian becomes Provisional President of the Republic. Guomindang (GMD) formed and wins majority in parliament. Sun resigns and Yuan Shikai declared provisional president
- 1915** Japan's Twenty-One Demands. Yuan attempts to become Emperor
- 1916** Yuan dies/warlord era begins
- 1917** Sun attempts to set up republic in Guangzhou. Russian Revolution
- 1918** Paris Peace settlement
- 1919** May Fourth Movement
- 1921** Chinese Communist Party (CCP) formed
- 1922** First United Front established between GMD and CCP
- 1925** Sun dies. National government set up under leadership of GMD
- 1926** Jiang Jieshi becomes leader of GMD in March. Northern Expedition launched in June. Tension increases between Jiang and Communist Central Committee. Jan–March: communist-led strikes in central China threaten Jiang. Shanghai massacre of communists in April. Communists expelled from GMD in July. Guangzhou massacre in December
- 1928** July: Jiang has control of Beijing, declares China now united. GMD now turns against the communists.

Long-term causes of the Chinese Civil War

Socio-economic factors

In 1900, China was ruled by the imperial Manchu dynasty. The vast majority of the population were peasants. Their life was hard, working the land, and most were extremely poor. It was the peasants who paid the taxes that in turn paid for the great Manchu imperial

court. It was also the peasants who faced starvation during floods or droughts, as their subsistence farming techniques often left them with barely enough to feed their families. The population in China grew by 8 per cent in the second half of the 19th century, but the land cultivated only increased by 1 per cent. This imbalance made famines more frequent. Peasants' plots of land were reduced, although at the same time landlords increased rents; some peasants had to pay 80 per cent of their harvest. Peasants would be driven to the cities by poverty, where there was already high unemployment due to improved technology and cheap Western imports.



Map of China in 1900.

Political weakness and the influence of foreign powers

In the century that preceded the Chinese Civil War, the European imperialist powers had humiliated and exploited China and caused the destabilization of China's ruling Manchu regime. Britain had defeated China in the mid 19th century in the Opium Wars, and subsequently the great Chinese Empire was carved up into spheres of influence by the Europeans, Americans and, at the end of the 19th century, by Japan.

China had been forced to sign unequal treaties that gave the imperialist powers extraordinary controls over Chinese trade, territory and ultimately sovereignty. Foreigners refused to abide by Chinese laws, and they had their own extra-territorial courts. In addition, missionaries flooded into China in an attempt to spread Christianity. Inflation and corruption weakened the financial position of the Manchus. Widespread corruption among local and provincial government officials also meant that a large portion of tax revenues did not reach the central government.

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Research question

Before the arrival of Europeans, China had been a great power in Asia for thousands of years. Research:

- Inventions associated with the Chinese
- The political relationship that China had with its neighbouring countries
- The impact of Confucianism on Chinese society
- The Qing dynasty.

The Self-Strengthening Movement

The Self-Strengthening Movement was a period of reform in China lasting from around 1861 to 1895. It was essentially a response to increasing Western power and influence in China, and was an attempt to resist and redress the concessions that China had been forced to agree to – primarily with Britain. However, the movement was divided on how to 'strengthen' China, and successful reform and development generally failed.

This photo of a group of Chinese Boxers illustrates their poor levels of armament compared with the contemporary European and Japanese military forces.



The overthrow of the Manchu dynasty

By the beginning of the 20th century, China was in a desperate condition, and there was a growing feeling that the ruling Manchu dynasty should be overthrown so that China could be Westernized and democracy introduced. The political weakness of the Manchu dynasty intensified with the death of the Emperor and the succession of a two-year-old boy, Pu Yi, in 1908. The former Emperor's brother, Prince Chun, ruled as regent, but was not capable of conducting the essential programme of reform. Indeed, he dismissed the potential troublemaker General Jiang Jieshi and humiliated him, and he increased taxation and frustrated the business classes without any socio-economic progress being made.

In October 1911, the ruling dynasty was overthrown in a revolution known as the Double Tenth. A republic was created. The revolution began when the government lost control of the military; soldiers in Wuchang revolted and rebellion spread quickly. Most provinces then declared themselves independent of Beijing. The key tensions and issues that led to this revolution would also be significant in the causes of the civil war 15 years later: the impact of imperialism, anti-foreign sentiment and political weakness.

In November 1911, in an attempt to seize the political initiative, delegates from the 'independent' provinces gathered in Nanjing to declare the creation of a Chinese Republic. A political exile, who had been in the USA during the revolution, was invited to be China's first President – Dr Sun Yixian.



Pu Yi, the Chinese Emperor from 1908 to 1912.

The imperial government attempted to use the former influential general of the Northern Army, Yuan Shikai, to suppress the rebellion, but he double-crossed them, arranging a deal with Sun Yixian. Sun agreed for Yuan Shikai to be President of the new republic in February 1912, in exchange for the end of Manchu rule in China. On 12 February 1912, Pu Yi abdicated.

The revolution, however, was incomplete. There was no real introduction of democracy, and most former imperial officials kept their positions. The impetus for the revolution was wholly Chinese, but had not been led by the middle classes. It had been the military who ignited the rising and Chinese radicals had joined in later. Michael Lynch argues that the revolution was fundamentally a revolt by the provinces against the centre: 'The Double Tenth was a triumph of regionalism. It represented a particular phase in the long-running contest between central autocracy and local autonomy, a contest that was to shape much of China's history during the following forty years' (*China: From Empire to People's Republic 1900–49*, 1999).

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Review question

How had the following weakened China in the century leading up to the civil war?

- European imperialism
- Failure of modernization
- Regionalism.

The rule of Yuan Shikai

Yuan ruled China as a military dictator from 1912 until 1915. However, the key issues that had led to the revolution in 1911 remained unresolved. Regionalism continued under Yuan's rule and became the key obstacle to a united China. Sun's party reformed as the Guomindang (GMD) in 1912, and declared itself a parliamentary party.

The GMD and the Three Principles

The GMD had been set up by Sun Yixian in 1912. He wanted to create a unified modern and democratic China. He had returned to China after the Double Tenth Revolution in 1911, and established a government in southern China, in Canton. Sun was not a communist, although he was willing to cooperate with them, and the organization of the GMD was along communist lines. Sun also saw the need to develop a GMD army.

Sun stated that he and his party had three guiding principles:

- Nationalism – to rid China of foreign influence, unite China and to regain its international respect
- Democracy – the people should be educated so that they could ultimately rule themselves democratically
- People's Livelihood – this was essentially 'land reform', the redistribution of land to the peasants and economic development.

It is argued that Sun agreed to Yuan Shikai's rule in order to avert the possibility of China descending into civil war. The republicans were not powerful enough at this stage to take on the military. It was a lesson that both the GMD and the Chinese communists would take on board – to win the political battle for China you need military power.

Sun attempted to undermine Yuan's power by moving him from his power base in Beijing to the south in Nanjing to set up a new government. Yuan refused to leave. At this point the GMD were a regional power only in the southern provinces, and the republicans were not sufficiently organized to mount resistance to Yuan. A 'second revolution' failed and Sun had to flee to Japan in 1913. However, Yuan mastered his own downfall by a series of

Sun Yixian

Sun Yixian was the inspirational leader of the Nationalist GMD. He wanted to modernize China by adopting Western political and economic methods. His anti-Manchu government views had led to his exile in Japan. Sun put together his ideas for the future of China in the form of 'the Three Principles of the People': Nationalism, Democracy and the People's Livelihood (economic reform and land redistribution). Sun was specific about Chinese nationalism as focused against imperialism, and in his view Chinese democracy would not copy that of the West. For China, the key was not the struggle for personal freedom, but for national freedom.



Dr Sun Yixian

ill-conceived acts. The 1912 Republican constitution had created regional assemblies, which he abolished in an attempt to centralize power. This act further alienated the provincial powers, especially as tax revenues were centrally controlled. Yuan's final miscalculation was to proclaim himself Emperor in 1916. At this point he lost the support of the military and stood down. He died three months later.

Short-term causes of the Chinese Civil War

Political weakness: regionalism – the warlords
1916–28

Map of China under the warlords. The marked borders are approximations only, and frequently changed.



The warlords

The warlord era can be divided into two periods: the first, pre-1920, was by default rather conservative (they wanted to preserve their own power and feudal rights); the second phase, after 1920, saw the rise of new military commanders who had not been powerful under the Republic, but who became more opportunistic. Although they are referred to collectively, the warlords were made up of leaders with very different aims and ambitions.

A key cause of the civil war in China was the increasing lack of unity in the country by the second decade of the 20th century. Indeed, regionalism or provincialism was to play a significant role not only in causing the war, but also in its course and outcome.

With the abdication and death of Yuan, China lost the only figure that had maintained some degree of unity. China broke up into small states and provinces, each controlled by a **warlord** and his private army. These warlords ran their territories independently, organizing and taxing the people in their domains. They had their own laws and even their own currencies. As warlords extended their power and wealth by expanding their territories, it was the peasants who suffered in their continuous wars. None of the warlords was willing to relinquish his armies or power to the central government.

The warlord period increased the sense of humiliation felt by many Chinese and, coupled with their desire to get rid of foreign influence, led to an increase in nationalism during the decade of warlord rule.

China had all but ceased to exist – it was in a state of internal anarchy. If the warlords remained, China would remain divided.

The May Fourth Movement

During this period, two political movements developed in response to both the warlords and foreign influence in China. The May Fourth Movement began in 1919. Students led a mass demonstration in Beijing against the warlords, traditional Chinese culture and the Japanese. The hostility had been ignited by the Versailles settlement, which had given to Japan Germany's former concessions in Shandong province. China, it seemed, had joined the Allies in the war only to be humiliated by them.

The significance of the May Fourth Movement was that it was dedicated to change and the rebirth of China as a proud and independent nation. Some intellectuals and students were inspired by revolutionary ideology in order to achieve these goals. The Bolshevik revolution of 1917 provided a practical example. The new Bolshevik government had also denounced the imperialists, and said that all contested border claims would be dropped. Imperialism was perceived by many as the main cause of China's problems.

Other Chinese were inspired by the GMD nationalist party, which had grown much stronger during the warlord period. These two groups – communists and nationalists – were to come together in an alliance in 1922.

Communists and nationalists

By the time Sun died in 1925, the GMD had made little progress towards fulfilling their 'Three Principles'. They had been limited by their lack of power beyond the south, and the fact they had to rely on alliances with warlords due to the weakness of their military power.

After the death of Sun, a general took over leadership of the GMD, General Jiang Jieshi. Jiang was a committed nationalist, and had enthusiastically joined the GMD. He had had military training before World War I in Japan, and then in the USSR. Indeed, the Soviets had begun to invest in the GMD, providing aid and assistance to the party. The Soviets believed they could foster good relations with a nationalist China. As well as the GMD, another revolutionary party emerged during the warlord period, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This communist party was officially set up in 1921. Initially, its membership was mainly intellectuals, and it had no real military strength. It was due to this weakness, and some shared aims, that the CCP agreed to work with the GMD. It was also consistently encouraged to cooperate with the nationalists by the USSR.



General Jiang Jieshi, leader of the nationalist forces.

Attempt to unify China: the First United Front

Both the GMD and the CCP wanted a unified China. They agreed that the first step to this was to get rid of the warlords, and in 1922 they formed the First United Front. Both parties also agreed that China needed to be free of the foreign imperialist powers. The Third Principle of Sun Yixian's, 'the People's Livelihood', was often called 'socialism', which convinced the Comintern that this was a party they could back. In addition, Jiang had studied in Moscow in 1923, and then ran the Whampoa Military Academy, which was set up and funded by the USSR to train GMD officers. Despite his Soviet links, however, Jiang was not a communist. Indeed, he became increasingly anti-communist, and began his leadership of the GMD by removing communists from key positions in the party. He stopped short of breaking off the alliance with the communists, as he knew that he must first take out his primary obstacle to a unified China – the warlords.

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Review questions

- 1 Briefly explain the significance of the following on the development of China up to 1916:
 - Sun Yixian
 - Yuan Shikai
 - Warlords
 - May Fourth Movement.
- 2 What were the key obstacles to setting up an effective central government in China in 1911?
- 3 What role did foreign involvement play in creating tension in China?

Jiang now determined to act on the first of the Three Principles and attempt to unify China by putting an end to the warlords' power. Together with the communists, the GMD set out on the 'Northern Expedition' in 1926 to crush the warlords of central and northern China. This operation was a great success; by 1927, the GMD and the communists had captured Hangzhou, Shanghai and Nanjing. They took Beijing in 1928. Within two years, the United Front of the GMD and the CCP had destroyed the power of the warlords, and the GMD announced that it was the legitimate government of China and the new capital and seat of government would be Nanjing.

Map showing the GMD's Northern Expedition, 1926–28.



Immediate cause of the Chinese Civil War: the GMD attacks the CCP

Despite the results of the Northern Expedition, China was not now unified. The United Front was only a friendship of convenience. What had united the CCP and the GMD – the fight against the warlords – was over, and ideology divided the two parties. The success of the Northern Expedition had been not only due to nationalist ambitions, it was also because of the communist promise of land to the peasants; this commitment had given

them local peasant support. The communists also had support from the industrial workers. For example, Zhou Enlai, a communist member of the GMD, had organized the workers rising in Shanghai.

The popular support for the communists was a key reason that Jiang decided he could no longer tolerate them in the GMD. There could be no more cooperation. Jiang was sympathetic to landlords and the middle classes, and was far more to the right than Sun had been. Areas under communist control had seen peasants attack landlords and seize land – this could not be tolerated. It seemed to Jiang that the CCP needed to be crushed before China could truly be unified under the GMD.

Jiang now expelled all communists from the GMD, and his attacks on the communists reached a peak in Shanghai in the 'White Terror' in April 1927. A powerful 'workers' army' under Zhou Enlai had proved very effective during the Northern Expedition and Jiang turned on them, using informants from the underworld of triads and gangsters – 5,000 communists were shot. The GMD carried out similar attacks in other cities, in what became known as the 'purification movement' – 'purification' meant the massacre of thousands of communists, trade unionists and peasant leaders. About a quarter of a million people were killed. Despite attempts to resist (Mao's Autumn Harvest Rising failed), the CCP was very nearly crushed by the end of 1927.

Ignoring the orders of the Comintern to retain the United Front, the CCP decided that its only hope of survival was to flee into the mountains of Jiangxi. The GMD pursued them, determined to destroy the communists. The civil war had begun.

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Review questions

- 1 Why did support for communism grow in China?
- 2 Why did Jiang turn against the communists?

Review activity

In groups, create a diagram (mind map or flow diagram) on a large sheet of paper to show the causes of the first period of the civil war in China. Decide what themes you want to develop, how you are going to show long-term and short-term causes, and how you are going to show any links between the causes. Each group should then present and explain its diagram to the rest of the class.

The course of the war

Timeline of events – 1930–50

- 1930–31 Jiang's First Encirclement campaign attacks Jiangxi Soviet, defeated by CCP
- 1931 Japanese attack Manchuria. Twenty-Eight Bolsheviks take over Central Committee of CCP. Jiang launches Second and Third Encirclement Campaigns against Jiangxi Soviet; both are defeated
- 1932 Japanese attack Shanghai. Jiangxi Soviet declares war on Japan. Fourth Encirclement Campaign begins
- 1933 Truce with Japan. Fifth Encirclement Campaign
- 1934 Long March begins

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